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ABSTRACT

This study assessed how in- and out-of-class experiences influenced the transition to college, student involvement with institutional life, and student perceptions about learning among 72 first-year community college students from three institutions with large numbers of either Hispanic or African American students. The students were interviewed in groups of 4 to 6 and were asked 13 open-ended questions about their backgrounds, transition to college, institutional attitudes, and perceptions of their learning ability. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach to identify patterns and themes. The study found that student characteristics associated with difficulty in getting involved either socially or academically on campus included the following: being a full-time mother, having been out of school for a long time, being afraid of failure, and having done poorly in high school. Validation by faculty, staff, friends, and relatives was characteristic of students who successfully made the transition to college. The paper also discusses student assessment methods that can promote student achievement and persistence in postsecondary education, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted of students upon entry, enrollment, and exit from the institution. (MDM)

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NATIONAL CENTER ON POSTSECONDARY
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# Validating Student Experience and Promoting Progress, Performance, and Persistence Through Assessment

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by

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The National Center is a consortium housed at The Pennsylvania State University that includes the University of Illinois at Chicago, Syracuse University, Northwestern University, Arizona State University, and the University of Tennessee.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess how in- and out-of-class experiences influenced:

- The transition to college for first-year community college students
- Student involvement with institutional life
- Student perceptions about learning

## Study Sites

The research sites selected for this study were:

- A community college in the Southwest, with large numbers of Hispanic students
- A predominantly African American, suburban, community college on the East Coast
- A predominantly Hispanic, suburban, community college on the West Coast

## Participant Selection

- Institutional contact person was instructed to select participants according to the following criteria:

  1. Mixed gender
  2. Groups of White, African American, Hispanic and Asian students.
  3. Completing their first semesters in college.
  4. Full-time students.

- A random sample was not selected, given that the study did not seek to draw inferences to a larger population. Rather, the intent was to describe the first-year experiences of a select group of students.

- Students were interviewed in groups of 4-6. Groups were limited to a single racial or ethnic background, but were mixed in terms of gender.
- Students were paid $10 for their participation in the focus group interviews.

## Protocol

- This study employed a 13 question, open-ended interview protocol. The protocol was broadly structured to contain prompts for information about student backgrounds, their transition to college, the connections they make with institutional life and perceptions of their learning ability.
- Interviews were tape recorded. A moderator and co-moderator lead the discussion. Post meetings between the moderator and co-moderator were held to compare impressions and share researcher notes.

## Data Analysis

- All data were analyzed using an inductive approach in order to identify the multiple realities found in the data.
- All data were analyzed by student responses according to a specific interview question. During this step, a variety of student responses were closely examined in an attempt to identify emergent constructs.
- Each construct was identified and classified according to student sub-group characteristics and campus.
- Data analysis involved uncovering patterns and themes. Data were analyzed individually and collaboratively.

**Table 1: East Coast Community College Student Respondents**
n=25

| Race / Ethnicity | Female | Male | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| African American | 13 | 5 | 18 |
| White (non-Hispanic) | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Hispanic | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Gender Totals | 15 | 10 | 25 |

**Table 2: West Coast Community College Student Respondents**
n=24

| Race / Ethnicity | Female | Male | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| African American | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Asian | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| White (non-Hispanic) | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Hispanic | 6 | 11 | 17 |
| Gender Totals | 9 | 15 | 24 |

**Table 3: Southwest Community College Student Respondents**
n=23

| Race / Ethnicity | Female | Male | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| African American | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| White (non-Hispanic) | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Hispanic | 6 | 7 | 13 |
| Gender Totals | 12 | 11 | 23 |

## The Involvement Theory

Two of the basic tenets of the involvement theory suggest:

- The more a student invests physical and psychological energy in the academic experience, the greater the potential for talent development.
- The transition to college is maximized when students make connections in college; for example:

  -- doing academic work

  -- participating in extracurricular activities

  -- interacting with faculty and college staff

Astin, 1985

# MATTERING

Mattering refers to the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

Mattering was originally labeled by Morris Rosenberg, a sociologist, as "a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p.165).

## CONFIRMATION, ACCEPTANCE AND VALIDATION

In *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) the researchers found that women who had been treated as stupid or incompetent yearned for the following:

- respect for their ideas and information about how to solve problems
- confirmation that they could be trusted to know and to learn, as well as to know that they could belong in college
- a need to know that there was something good inside of them, because they worried that there was not
- the realization that the knowledge gained from personal experience was important and valuable
- the need to be accepted as a person--they resented being oppressed and patronized
- praise and approval from faculty, as many were entering college with self doubts
- a sense of community with faculty and students
- acceptance into the community of learners
- others to know that their out-of-class experiences had been powerful and that these often had a greater impact on their learning than a set of standards in the classroom

## BECOMING INVOLVED IN CAMPUS ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE

A. CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS NOT LIKELY TO GET INVOLVED ON THEIR OWN:

   1. ACADEMICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNPREPARED FOR COLLEGE

   2. AFRAID OF FAILURE

   3. FEEL LOST IN A STRANGE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

   4. DON'T KNOW WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK

   5. FEEL THAT ALMOST EVERYONE IN THEIR LIVES HAS GIVEN UP ON THEM

   6. LACK SENSE OF DIRECTION

B. MERELY OFFERING INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES WILL NOT WORK

   1. NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS LACK THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL NECESSARY TO MAKE FULL USE OF THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

   2. MANY FEEL THEY DON'T BELONG IN COLLEGE

**Characteristics of students who find it difficult to get involved:**

The following types of students were found to have difficulty in getting involved either socially or academically on-campus:

- Full-time mothers
- Students who have been out of school for some time
- Students who are afraid of failure
- Students who are scared of a new culture
- Students who dropped out of high school
- Students who did poorly in high school
- Married students
- Physically disabled students
- Students who feel out of place in a new environment
- Students who have self-doubts, who feel incapable of learning
- Those who have been "off the track of life'
- Single parents
- Immature students
- Apprehensive students

*And students in the following circumstances:*

- Students who were placed in "slow classes" in high school and felt isolated;
- Those who take evening courses when no services are available;
- Students who never liked high school or who were rebellious in high school;
- Introverted students who find it hard to make friends or who are shy;
- Students who never accomplished anything on their own, who had everything done for them;
- Those who have unclear goals, this is especially true for younger students;
- Students who feel lost, who don't even know what questions to ask;
- Out-of-state students who have no clue about the college social/academic life.

## THE ROLE OF VALIDATION

Students went through a wide range of experiences ranging from invalidation to validation what were the result of interacting with in- and out-of-class agents such as faculty, friends and relatives.

- Examples of invalidation

  --Faculty and staff who discounted life experiences.

  --Faculty who appeared not to care.

  --Friends who teased students about not attending a "real college".

  --Out of class friends who did not care about academics and wanted the students to socialize with them.

- Example of validation

  --Faculty who worked closely with students and push them to excel.

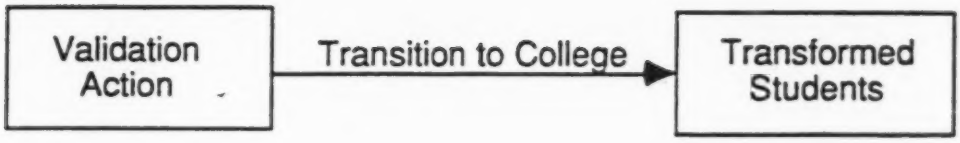
  --Faculty who encouraged students to work together and help each other.

  --Spouses who provided support and encouragement.

  --Faculty who treated students as equals and respected students.

- Validation appeared to help students make the transition to college, get involved in institutional life and become powerful learners. These students became excited about learning, became motivated to succeed against all odds, felt that they were learning something meaningful and felt they were cared about as a person, not just as a student.

## The Impact of Validation




### Transformational Changes:

- Believe "I can do it"
- Believe in inherent capacity to learn
- Become excited about learning
- Feel a part of the learning community
- Become motivated or driven
- Feel cared about as a person, not just as a student

## Validating Agents

Out-of-Class Agents:

- Significant Others:
  - Spouse, Boyfriend, Girlfriend
  - Family: Parents, Siblings, Relatives, Children
  - Friends: Classmates, College Friends, Non-College Friends
- College Staff:
  - Faculty
  - Coaches
  - Counselors and Advisors
  - Tutors and Teaching Assistants
  - Resident Advisors

In-Class Agents:

- Faculty
- Classmates
- Lab Instructors
- Teaching Assistants

## Elements of Involvement

Involvement can be viewed as having the following characteristics:

- Involvement is the time, energy and effort students devote to the learning process.
- Highly involved students devote considerable energy to studying, working on-campus, participating actively in student organizations and interacting frequently with faculty members and student peers.
- Involvement is something students do, rather than something that is done for them.
- Getting involved in institutional life is primarily the student's responsibility.

## Elements of Validation

Validation can be viewed as having the following elements:

- Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and personal development.
- Validation occurs along a continuum, with a student experiencing differing degrees and forms of validation with distinct validating agents at different times and on different occasions.
- Validation may be seen as a prerequisite to student involvement.
- Validation is developmental in nature. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated the richer the academic and interpersonal learning experience.
- Validation can be most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience and when it is offered repeatedly by different agents and at different times throughout the college years.
- Validation can be measured both quantitatively (i.e., the number of times a validation agent reaches out to a student to support or encourage) and qualitatively (i.e., the degree and form of validation received)
- Student learning and growth are directly related to the extent that validation is present in their academic and social learning experience
- Validation is reciprocal in nature. When faculty and counselors validate, the transforming experience of the student in turn validates them.

## The Validation Continuum

| Invalidation | <——————————> | Validation |
|---|---|---|
| Low expectations | | High expectations |
| Discounting life experiences | | Encouragement |
| Depersonalization | | Personable |
| Non-caring | | Caring |
| Lack of concern | | Support |
| Non-acknowledgment | | Acceptance |
| Impersonal | | Sensitivity |
| Unavailable to students | | Receptive |
| Condescending | | Understanding |
| Detached from students | | Mentoring |
| Poor counseling | | Role modeling |
| Short-tempered | | Receptive |
| Unfair | | Fairness |
| Uneasiness | | Assurance |
| Discomfort | | Comfort |

## CATEGORIES OF ASSESSMENT

*TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF ASSESSMENT*

1. Principles and issues of constructing, administering and evaluating tests that faculty administer in the classroom.

2. Assessment related to a specific aspect of the curriculum

   - Critical thinking
   - Writing
   - Experiential learning

3. Accountability assessment--focus on institution-wide student outcomes

*NEWER, MORE NONTRADITIONAL VIEWS OF ASSESSMENT*

4. Assessing learning in the student's own experience (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenkey & Others, 1985; Padilla, 1991)

   - Out-of-class prior learning
   - Life-long learning
   - Heuristic learning--"Knowledge that takes the form of rules of thumb, ad hoc solutions, tricks of the trade, insider information, customs, norms, practices, and conventional wisdom. Having a good counselor, mentor, friend, buddy, soul sister, colleague, supporter, booster, etc., with experience on the scene is an effective means for rapidly acquiring such knowledge" (Padilla, 1991 p. 85).

5. Assessing diverse ways of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992)

   - Absolute knowing
   - Transitional knowing
   - Independent knowing
   - Contextual knowing

# ASSESSING HEURISTIC KNOWLEDGE

**Assessment is through "dialogical research" which involves researchers and subjects (participants) in a partnership to achieve greater understanding about a given situation.**

***EXAMPLES OF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:***

**1. Think of a successful student on this campus. What barriers must this student overcome in order to be successful?**

**Answers can be classified into different types of barriers:**

**a. *Institutional*--admissions process, lack of mentors or role models**

**b. *Classroom functions and instruction*--lack of study skills, instructor's delivery of instruction**

**c. *Out-of-class environment*--lack of family support, conflicts with peers not in college**

**d. *Financial*--failure to qualify for financial aid, lack money-management skills**

**e. *Personal Characteristics*--unclear educational goals, lack of self-esteem**

**Since many of these barriers require heuristic knowledge to overcome them, it could be beneficial to determine the specific characteristics of heuristic knowledge that successful students might possess.**

**2. Think of a successful student on this campus. What kinds of things does a student need to know to be successful?**

**Knowledge exemplars could be classified into four types:**

**a. *General*--know personal values and goals, know about the job placement center**

**b. *Specific*--know that tutoring services are available and free, know how many hours you need to study**

c. *Incremental*--know more English

d. *Procedural*--know how to cope with conflicts and stress, how to organize notes

Source: Padilla, R. (1991). Assessing heuristic knowledge to enhance college students' success. In Keller, G.D., Deneen, J. & Magallan, R. *Assessment and Access: Hispanics in Higher Education.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

## DIVERSE WAYS OF KNOWING

| Type | Knowledge Characteristics | Assessment |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Absolute | • Is certain or absolute<br>• Is acquired from authorities | • Test knowledge of material<br>• Teacher constructed tests |
| 2. Transitional | • Is partially certain and partially uncertain<br>• Authorities are not all-knowing<br>• No right or wrong answers | • Concentrates on understanding and applying knowledge<br>• Hands-on learning<br>• Applied learning |
| 3. Independent | • Students view themselves as equals and hold their own opinions as valid<br>• Knowledge is uncertain-- everyone has their own beliefs<br>• Students think for themselves | • Rewards independent thinking<br>• Independent study<br>• Individually designed assignment |
| 4. Contextual | • Knowledge is contextual-- judged on the basis of evidence in context<br>• Some views are more valid than others, depending on available evidence | • Teachers and students work together toward a goal and determine progress together<br>• Colleagues provide feedback to students |

Source: Adapted from Baxter Magolda, M. (1992). Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT

| Level | What To Assess | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Entry | 1.1 Background Characteristics<br>• Race/Ethnicity<br>• Age<br>• Generational status<br>• Socioeconomic status<br>• Gender<br>• Geographical residence<br>• High schools attended<br>• Credentials earned<br>• Academic preparation<br>• Values<br>• Expectations of college<br>• Perceptions about getting involved | 1.1 Surveys<br>Interviews |
| | 1.2 Ways of Knowing<br>• Learning style<br>• Ways of acquiring information<br>• Assessment preferences<br>• Strategies that make a difference in learning (in- and out-of-class) | 1.2 Focus group interviews<br>Learning style inventories<br>Case studies |

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT

| Level | What To Assess | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Entry** | 1.3 The Student's Own Experience<br>• Powerful, out-of-class learning experiences<br>• Heuristic knowledge | 1.3 Focus group interviews<br>Observations<br>Case studies<br>Dialogical research |
| **2. College Enrollment** | 2.1 Student Behaviors (i.e., study habits time devoted to studying, etc.) | 2.1 Focus group interviews<br>Surveys |
| | 2.2 College Performance<br>• Grades<br>• Writing skills<br>• Critical thinking skills<br>• Synthesis and analysis skills | 2.2 Tests<br>Observations<br>Faculty ratings |
| | 2.3 Academic Integration<br>• Extent of faculty interaction<br>• Participation in honors program<br>• Satisfaction with faculty interactions | 2.3 Surveys<br>Observations<br>Focus group interviews |

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT

| Level | What To Assess | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| **2. College Enrollment** | 2.4 Social Integration<br>• Participation in student body organizations<br>• Perceptions of services and programs<br>• Friendship networks | 2.4 Surveys<br>Focus group interviews<br>Observations |
| | 2.5 Student retention<br>• Reasons why students leave<br>• Satisfaction with institutional life<br>• Factors that influence retention | 2.5 Surveys<br>Focus group interviews |
| **3. Exit** | 3.1 Student perceptions of college<br>3.2 Satisfaction with education received<br>3.3 Future plans<br>3.4 Perceptions of how the campus could have been more satisfying to ethnic and racial minorities.<br>3.5 Readiness for advanced college work<br>3.6 Readiness for work force | 3.1-3.9 Surveys<br>Focus groups<br>Transcript Analysis |

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT

| Level | What To Assess | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Exit | 3.7 Employment<br>• First-year salaries<br>• Promotions<br>• Types of employment<br>3.8 Transfer to senior institutions<br>3.9 Success of students who transfer<br>• Grades<br>• Extent that transfer shock occurred<br>• Number of units accepted<br>• Majors selected | 3.1-3.9 Surveys<br>Focus Groups<br>Transcript Analysis |